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21st Century English: Teaching An International Language

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Abstract

During the latter half of the 20th century English became firmly established as the international language of communication and the number of non-native speakers regularly using English greatly increased. English teaching also experienced rapid growth and development, with native speakers living around the world, teaching and providing a model for language use. Traditionally, English teaching aimed to prepare students for communication with native English speakers both for business and travel. This paper re-assesses this goal by first providing a brief theoretical background outlining different paradigms for English teaching, and then describing the current situation in Japan. The final section attempts to offer some practical suggestions for teachers engaged in preparing Japanese students for international communication in the 21st century.

Background

The twentieth century saw English become the global language, and a subsequent explosion in English Language Teaching (ELT) around the world. In most countries, including Japan, this meant teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with teachers trying to prepare students to communicate with native English speakers from countries such as Australia. With English now used regularly by people all over the world, it is important that we re-assess if this goal is still appropriate.

1) Teaching Paradigms

Traditional Models

Kachru (1985) first coined the phrase 'Inner Circle' to describe countries such as America, where English is used as a first language and is used for all official purposes. In this context

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English is studied as a Second Language (ESL) or Additional Language (EAL), and students are usually attempting to integrate into the local culture, often as immigrants. McKay (2002, p. 35) states that "...speakers come to identify with the culture of the Inner Circle country and become members of English-only speech communities." With the aim being assimilation into that society, students try to approximate native speech patterns and behavior.

In 'Outer Circle' countries such as India and Singapore, English has official status and serves alongside local, native languages as the common language of communication. English is learned as a second language, and local varieties of English are used outside the classroom, with standard forms being taught in formal education. Inner circle English is generally considered to be the correct form, but local varieties are widely used within each country and there is some debate regarding the validity of local English.

The most common form of ELT occurs as part of formal education in 'Expanding Circle' countries, such as Japan. English serves no official purpose and is used only to communicate with people from other countries that do not share the same native language. English is taught to children in schools as a foreign language (EFL). The focus has traditionally been on English from one of the inner circle countries, and introducing aspects of culture associated with it. The native speaker provides the model and sets the standards for non-native speakers who try to conform to the norms of the target language community. English is predominantly used in the classroom and has no official role in society and local varieties of English are not accepted as being correct.

Other Paradigms

With the spread of English in the twentieth century, many have argued that it now has the status of an international language (Mckay 2002, Schnitzer 1995). Seidlhofer (2005, p. 339) states that "despite being welcomed by some and deplored by others, it cannot be denied that English functions as a global lingua franca." Along with this change we have seen the development of several new paradigms for teaching, including English as an International Language (EIL), also known as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Proponents of this approach argue that as non-native speakers of English are now in the majority (Kachru 1996, p.138), they need no longer conform to native speaker models, or learn cultural practices of inner circle countries. EIL educators are concerned with maintaining mutual comprehensibility, with every variety of English considered equally valid.

A slightly different paradigm is English for Intercultural Communication (EIC). Again the assumption is that English is a global language with no single variety having superiority, and that communication occurs between non-native speakers from different cultural backgrounds. The main difference with EIL is that cultural, as well as linguistic differences are seen as being responsible for miscommunication. EIL does not explicitly refer to culture, but EIC literature goes beyond the classic term of communicative competence, talking about intercultural communicative competence (Baxter 1983, Bennett 1998), and aims to prepare

students for interactions with people from other cultures by making them aware of how culture affects communication.

2) Teaching in Japan Today

In the following section, I will attempt to describe the current state of English teaching in Japan based on over 10 years of personal experience teaching at various levels of the education system, and my reading of the relevant literature.

a) Standards and Ownership

In Japan English as spoken by a native speaker from an inner circle country is considered the appropriate goal for students. Many English teachers are employed based in a large part on being a native speaker from an inner circle country. The demand for native speakers becomes clear by accessing employment websites such as Gaijinpot.com, where almost all English teaching jobs require native speaker competence. Students are increasingly required to take the TOEIC test which only recently moved from using purely North American native-English speakers to now include speakers from other inner circle countries. With the importance of TOEIC in terms of future job prospects, it is clear that inner circle varieties of English are setting the standard. Suenobu (2003) describes the situation as follows:

> ...there exists a firm belief in Japan that the English we learn should use American or British English as a model. No other variety of English should be allowed to be taught or learned in English language classes in Japan. (p. 19)

It is clear that the emphasis on inner circle varieties of English is at the exclusion of other varieties of English, despite the fact that inner circle users are now very much in the minority. Suenobu (2003) criticizes this approach claiming that native-speaker proficiency is an unrealistic goal for the majority of learners, and therefore students are destined to fail and become disillusioned with their language studies.

Widdowson (1994, p. 382) considers English to belong to the global community, however this view is not commonly held in Japan as Matsuda (2003, p. 493) found when she investigated the beliefs of Japanese high school students: "English is the property of native English speakers (Americans and British, more specifically), and the closer [students] follow the native speaker's usage, the better." Japan does not have its own valid form of English as Kachi (2004, p. 28) explains: "The exact word "Japanese English" is used very derogatorily in Japan, mainly referring to the distinctive pronunciation traits that L1 Japanese transfer to L2 English." Although officially the government recognizes English as an international language (MEXT 2002), Japanese people still seem to view it as the property of native speakers from inner circle countries.

Nelson (1992) discusses the idea of communicative competence with respect to English and claims that new varieties of English are deemed unacceptable simply as a result of historical and cultural factors. Citing striking grammatical differences between English-English and American-English which are both accepted as being standard forms, Nelson explains that many new varieties of English will have to be accepted if we believe English is a world language. He finishes with an imperative which I believe needs to be heeded in Japan: "Each English language user must now say, "It is my language," and then adapt it variously to appropriate contexts in "my" culture or another's." (Nelson 1992, p. 337). Only by taking ownership of English will students realize that it serves as a tool for communication rather than a set of rules which must be followed. Many researchers believe that this realization is an essential step on the path to gaining true command over a foreign language, and as long as students fail to feel any ownership over the language they will be unable to make progress as rapidly as they could.

b) Patterns of Communication

Within an EFL paradigm, interaction is between non-native speakers and native speakers from inner circle countries. Mizuno (2004, p. 178) describes English speakers on television and in adverts in Japan as predominantly "white, native English speakers" and, although the situation has vastly improved, it is still comparatively rare to see outer circle speakers feature in English education programs. The government claims one of its goals is to increase student knowledge of different cultures (Sakui 2004, p. 157), and although there is an awareness that English communication will often be with other non-native speakers (EIL), the preferred model in general education remains that of a Japanese student using English as a foreign language to communicate with a native English speaker.

c) Cultural Content

Porter and Samovar (1994, p. 16) explain that "language is the primary vehicle by which a culture transmits its beliefs, values, norms and world view." English teaching materials in Japan often focus on the West, with little or no discussion of Asian cultures outside of Japan. Mckay (2004,) talks about the common approach in text books: "...although in Japan the high school textbooks by and large include Japanese culture as the basis for cultural content, when Western cultures are introduced they are often presented for imitation" (p. 15). Culture is generally presented in an "us and them" manner, with the implicit message that knowledge of the "other" culture will allow you to successfully communicate with people from the given country.

3) Embracing a new approach

Having described how I perceive the current state of English teaching and learning in

Japan, I will now outline what I believe to be a more appropriate approach, including some practical advice and materials which can be used in the classroom.

a) The Language Dilemma: What Kind of English?

In 2007 there was a more than 10% increase in trade conducted by Japan with China (Japan in figures), and this trend is likely to continue with China now the second biggest economy in the world. Trade is usually carried out by two non-native speakers using English as a common language, no longer conforming to native speaker standards. Although communication involving Japanese people using English for both business and travel is likely to be between two non-native English speakers, there is still a relative lack of material to cater for this. Clearly a standardized form of English will ensure smoother communication between two non-native speakers, but students need also to be aware of other varieties of English, and exposure to a wide variety of English will surely be beneficial. I have had Japanese friends who regularly travel to Asia on business lament the lack of audio material to prepare them for the kind of English they will hear in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. Kachru (1992) argues for the use of World Englishes in the classroom, stating that English has become a means of communication between non-native speakers and claiming that in such instances (p. 357) "English English, or American English conventions of language use are not only irrelevant; these may even be considered inappropriate by the interlocuters." Bearing this in mind Kachru goes on to recommend a list of resources for teaching World Englishes (p. 361) which will be of use to teachers.

Matsuda (2003) found that high school students in Japan were aware of the existence of different forms of English outside of inner circle varieties but unclear as to what they were. It is important that we raise awareness and teach students that no single variety is superior or preferable to another. By introducing many different varieties of English, students will at least become more aware of and comfortable with English spoken in many different ways, and many researchers believe diversity of language input is the most suitable approach (Cook 1999, Sifakis 2004). Schnitzer (1995, p. 231) states that "audio and video materials must... include speakers from all the three circles." Cook (1999, p. 199) gives a list of resources for use in the classroom including English newspapers from outer circle countries, all easily accessed via the internet. By adopting this approach and these materials, we can help students become more confident in their own variety of Japanese English and no longer feel the pressure of the unattainable goal of native speaker competence.

Crystal (2003) used figure 1 to show the current state of English users in the world, with the reality that no single group occupy the central world standard. Unlike the original model by Kachru (1985), inner circle varieties of English have no higher standing over other varieties of English, with outer circle varieties of English differentiated merely by the fact that they are standardizing rather than accepted standards. Japanese speakers contribute to the East Asian Standardizing English, a form which is not yet fully accepted or developed, but

which accounts for large numbers of speakers including Chinese users of English. According to Levis (2006, p. 259), non-native users of English who share the same L1 will communicate most effectively in English by conforming to shared norms of pronunciation.

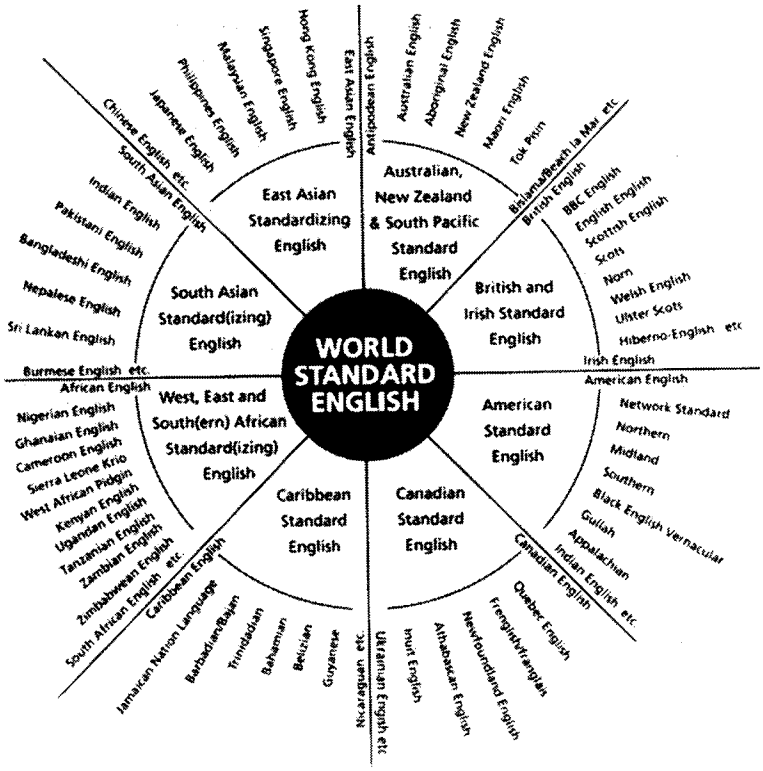

Figure 1. Standards of English
(from The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language, by David Crystal, 2003)

This suggests that when non-native speakers from different countries within Asia are attempting to communicate, a knowledge of the norms of each other's English will serve them well. Learners should be ready to adopt the form of English which is most effective for communication. When there is no shared standard this means gravitating towards the centre of the circle, and adopting more traditional standard forms. By introducing the above figure to students and explaining the different patterns of communication we can help to prepare students for communication. This figure also supports the idea that using a wide variety of different English users in classroom materials will benefit students, including a focus on the particular norms of English for a given country.

Conforming to traditional standards does not always guarantee success as non-native speakers are able to communicate efficiently given the correct linguistic and cultural awareness as illustrated by Nerriere, a Frenchman who came to Asia in the nineties

conducting business for IBM (McCrum 2006): "[the non-native speaker's] conversation with the Japanese and Koreans 'was much more efficient than what could be observed between them and the [native speaker] employees who came with [him]."

Perhaps as a non-native speaker, Nerriere was more aware of the linguistic difficulties of communication and more aware of the role of culture in communication. Our job is to prepare students for these kinds of interactions by raising awareness of, and exposure to a wide variety of English. With the spread of the internet and proliferation of computers in classrooms this is now easily achieved. Text books such as Touchstone now use speakers from a wide variety of countries including students with non-standard English, and this is a very positive step forward in preparing our students for communication in the 21st century.

b) The Cultural Dilemma: Which Culture and How?

Cultural content is important in language teaching and Byram (1997, p. 46) believes that "FL teaching within an institution of general education has a responsibility to develop a critical awareness of the values and significance of cultural practices in the other and one's own culture." The current focus on the culture of the native speaker teacher may often be of interest for students, but Prodromou (1988) believes that this should be presented in relation to the students' own culture to aid relevance. McKay (2004) warns that the students' culture is familiar and therefore may be boring, and claims that approaches which focus on comparison of cultures enhance the "otherness" aspect of cultural differences, not regarded as helpful in establishing positive relations. Bennett (1998, p. 10) warns that "a knowledge of the differences between U.S American and Japanese decision-making styles is not in itself particularly useful." With students likely to encounter speakers from such a wide variety of cultures, the teacher cannot possibly provide information on them all. Clearly a different approach is necessary.

Students I teach seem interested and motivated to learn about British culture, and comparisons with Japan also raise students' awareness of their own culture. There is some justification to this approach but Byram et al (2002, p. 9) believe that the role of the teacher is "...to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values, just as much as to develop a knowledge of a particular culture or country." They suggest a far more skills based approach in line with EIC, teaching students to be aware of cultural differences, and how to overcome problems that may arise in communication as a result. There is ample literature concerning intercultural communication training (ICT) which serves as a useful resource for ELT (for examples see Baxter 1983, Byram et al 2002). Tasks such as critical incidents which describe situations where culture causes problems in communication can easily be adapted to be used in class in order to raise student awareness of intercultural communication difficulties. An example of this can be seen in appendix A, illustrating how students can be encouraged to think beyond simply the language but also consider how context and culture may convey appropriacy on statements or questions. If students are able to consider the different

possibilities for communication breakdown then they are also far more likely to be able to attempt to repair conversations, and introducing the list given in appendix A will enable students to consider the multitude of possibilities for the problems they encounter. Somewhat akin to the deliberate focus on conversational strategies which is now common in language teaching, this approach enables students to cope in a wide variety of cultures using English by allowing them to analyze the reasons behind communication problems and encouraging critical thinking. Materials like this can be incorporated into a communicative language course with relative ease, and I have had very positive responses from students when using this material at both the high school and university level.

Conclusion

Newsweek ran an article on the state of world Englishes in 2005 and claimed that "the new English speakers aren't just passively absorbing the language-they're shaping it" (Power, 2005). It is important that teachers are aware of the changes and the development of language in order to effectively prepare students for communication in the 21st century. In this short paper I have attempted to outline some of the different paradigms for English teaching and some resources which can be used in the classroom. I would like to end with a word of caution by stressing that I am not encouraging a non-critical view of regional language forms and accept that mutual comprehensibility must always be the number one priority for communication. Rather, I echo the call made by Luk and Lin (2006, p. 19) that as SLA teachers and researchers we should work together towards "achieving common understanding of mutual intelligible regional varieties of English beyond national boundaries." I hope this paper aid this process.

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Appendix A (R. Fay, Teaching English for Intercultural Communication)

Betting on the bull

1) Read the story below. Why do you think George upset the Spanish people?

_____

_____

Betting on the Bull (Part 1)

George is an American salesman working for a multinational company in Spain. He had expressed an interest to his Spanish coworkers in watching a bullfight, so when the first corrida (fight) of the season was announced, they invited him to go with them. As the first bull was let out, George jokingly asked the others, "So who's going to win? I'll put my money on the bull". The Spanish people suddenly became silent, and one of his fellow salesmen said angrily, "You Americans know nothing". George did not know what he had said to upset them and felt very uncomfortable throughout the corrida.

2) In the second part (see below), four possible reasons (a-d) are given to explain why George accidentally was rude. Decide which reason you think is the most likely as an explanation. Indicate your answer by writing the appropriate letter here:

Explanation (a-d) _____

Betting on the Bull (Part 2)

a) His coworkers thought George was suggesting they bet on the outcome.
b) George was viewing the event as a sport; the Spanish view bullfighting more as a ritual.
c) His colleagues obviously thought the bull had no chance, and so George was being very stupid.
d) It is very unlucky for the matador (bullfighter) for someone to say publicly that the bull will win.

Reasons for problems in cross-cultural communication

	Checklist Item	Checklist Item Gloss
1)	ROLES	Our role relationship wasn't clear.
2)	GOALS	We were trying to reach different communication goals.
3)	PERSON	I was speaking to the wrong person for my goal.
4)	PROCEDURE	The procedure (meeting, interview, etc) was not shared by both people.
5)	PLACE	The place of communication wasn't appropriate for everyone involved.
6)	PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	Conditions (temperature, noise, etc) interfered with communication.
7)	TIME	Communication occurred at the wrong time of day; or, not enough time was allowed for successful understanding.
8)	ORAL COMMUNICATION	Aspects of spoken English (oral delivery, information structure, use of silence, etc) interfered with communication.
9)	WRITTEN/GRAPHIC MATERIALS	These were used in such a way that there were negative effects on the oral communication; or, these were not used when they could have supported the communication.
10)	1-WAY/2-WAY	One or both of us were talking when we should have been listening.
11)	TURN-TAKING	One or both of us were unable comfortably to take turns in speaking.
12)	FEEDBACK	There was inadequate feedback.
13)	NONVERBAL	Nonverbal communication was not monitored; or, nonverbal messages said more than was intended.
14)	INFERENCE	One or both of us inferred something that was not intended; inferences were not checked.
15)	ASSUMPTIONS	One or both of us failed to check assumptions.
16)	ATTITUDES	Negative or judgmental attitudes interfered with understanding.
17)	CULTURE	One or both of us were unable to take the other person's cultural perspective, insofar as this influenced perception of goals, relationships, procedure, etc.
18)	ENGLISH	One or both of us failed to see this as an English Intercultural Communication situation.